



Frequently Asked Questions **Environmental Programs**

<http://www.fema.gov/ehp>

Q: What are FEMA's environmental responsibilities following Hurricane Katrina?

A: FEMA's role is to ensure that disaster response and recovery efforts comply with Federal environmental laws and executive orders, protect people, and do not cause additional damage to the environment. For example, FEMA, in collaboration with local, State, and Federal partners, provides guidance on environmental requirements related to the selection of temporary housing sites, debris removal and disposal, and the reconstruction of infrastructure. Federal environmental requirements are meant to assure public health and safety, and protect the environment during recovery operations.

Through technical assistance and mitigation grant programs, FEMA provides incentives for limiting construction in floodplains and protecting environmentally sensitive areas. In addition, communities participating in FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program agree to adopt and enforce floodplain management ordinances, particularly with respect to new construction.

Q: What are FEMA's environmental responsibilities related to temporary housing?

A: A primary FEMA responsibility is to ensure that temporary housing sites are located in safe areas and that construction and population of the housing will not harm the environment. The agency conducts site visits to ensure that temporary housing is located away from hazardous waste sites and other areas that could pose a threat to public health or safety. Site inspections are typically conducted as the planning for the housing proceeds, so as not to delay the delivery of this vital service. Environmental assessments and "Findings of No Significant Impact" for various temporary housing proposals are posted to FEMA's Web site, (<http://www.fema.gov/ehp/docs.shtm>).

In addition, FEMA must ensure that its actions regarding temporary housing are in accordance with the Executive Order (12898) on Environmental Justice. This Executive Order requires that Federal actions not have disproportionately high, adverse effects on minority and low-income populations.

Q: How does FEMA prevent hazardous materials from spreading during debris removal?

A: FEMA ensures that debris management operations comply with State and Federal Clean Air Act requirements. Debris is carefully inspected prior to removal. Hazardous materials are segregated and disposed of in designated landfills, which are federally regulated. Non-hazardous debris is recycled whenever possible. Debris from building demolitions that cannot be recycled is transported to construction landfills. Debris consisting of trees and vegetation is either chipped for mulch or burned in incinerators.

Q: How does FEMA take environmental considerations into account during cleanup and restoration efforts?

A: The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires Federal agencies to consider the environmental impacts of their proposed actions, and reasonable alternatives to those actions, as part of the decision making process. NEPA's "emergency procedures," as well as those of other environmental laws, enable FEMA to ensure regulatory compliance without delaying the delivery of disaster assistance to individuals and communities.

Q: How does FEMA oversee these environmental programs in areas affected by Hurricane Katrina?

A: FEMA has deployed environmental specialists in hazardous materials, endangered species, wetlands, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and other issues to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas to ensure environmental compliance in recovery efforts. An Environmental Liaison Officer in the Joint Field Offices (JFOs) in each of these States oversees environmental operations.

Q: How is FEMA addressing environmental health issues, and particularly, their impact on low-income and minority populations?

A: FEMA is careful to assure that emergency response and recovery operations, such as establishing temporary housing and removing debris, do not have disproportionately high adverse impacts on the health and safety of low-income and minority populations. Of particular concern is the potential exposure to toxic materials, unclean water, or unhealthy conditions.

Q: How do FEMA's environmental responsibilities compare to those of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and U.S. Coast Guard?

A: FEMA's environmental responsibilities relate specifically to activities funded under the Robert T. Stafford Act. The EPA and Coast Guard have distinct environmental missions.

The EPA provides technical assistance regarding management of contaminated debris. It also conducts environmental testing to determine levels of hazardous substances. For example, the EPA is collecting and analyzing air, water, and soil data to determine potential contamination levels in New Orleans. FEMA is coordinating the data with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), and State and local public health officials. Local jurisdictions use these Federal analyses to determine which areas are safe.

The mission of the U.S. Coast Guard is to protect the public, the environment, and U.S. economic interests in the nation's ports and waterways. For example, the U.S. Coast Guard has been working to restore services to merchant mariners in the New Orleans area. The EPA and U.S. Coast Guard have also responded to oil and hazardous substance spills in the disaster area.



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Q: Should flood-affected residents be concerned about air quality inside their homes?

A: Yes. Standing water and wet materials are a breeding ground for microorganisms, such as viruses, bacteria, and mold, which can cause disease and allergic reactions long after a hurricane has passed. People at higher risk for adverse health affects from molds include infants, children, the elderly, pregnant women, “immune compromised” individuals, and people with respiratory conditions such as allergies. Residents should thoroughly clean and completely dry areas that were wet to prevent mold from becoming a health problem. More information is available on EPA’s Web site (<http://www.epa.gov/katrina/healthissues.html#floodmold>).